



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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FWS MOVES TO PROTECT WATERFOWL FEEDING AREAS FROM NUTRIA

Methods of controlling the nutria, a rodent resembling a muskrat or beaver, are being considered by the Fish and Wildlife Service to stave off a serious threat to waterfowl feeding areas on national wildlife refuges, according to a report submitted to Assistant Secretary of the Interior Ross L. Leffler by Daniel H. Janzen, Director of the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife.

The control plans call for a coordinated approach to the problem, with three of the Service branches--wildlife research, wildlife refuges, and predator and rodent control--combining their efforts.

The nutria is variously called a "king-sized muskrat" and "swamp beaver" although it is neither a muskrat nor a beaver. A South American native, the rodent became established in this country nearly 20 years ago. It has increased in numbers tremendously, and now inhabits a large portion of the Southeast and Gulf Coast as well as the Mississippi River drainage and the Pacific Northwest.

The nutria is a vegetarian and as such is in direct competition with migratory waterfowl and muskrats for the natural feed in the marshes. Trouble is reported in many places, including the waterfowl marshes along the Gulf Coast and on the South Atlantic seaboard.

The problem as far as the Fish and Wildlife Service is presently concerned is acute on the Delta, Lacassine, and Sabine National Wildlife Refuges in Louisiana, where the rodent is consuming great quantities of the delta duck potato, chufa roots and other feed needed by the migratory waterfowl in the winter months. Many cases are reported on Delta Refuge of nutria eliminating all vegetation over large areas in search of roots and tubers. Such nutria "eat outs" are common on the Gulf Coast marshes and Federal refuges in Louisiana.

In some instances the rodent has been equally destructive of unwanted vegetation such as phragmites cane, but refuge personnel say their damage far outweighs any good they do.

The proposed program of nutria control on refuges will be given special attention by the Denver Research Laboratory of the Fish and Wildlife Service. With the cooperation of refuge and predator and rodent control personnel, it is anticipated the program will be one of research and management combined.

Personnel from the Research Laboratory will meet with field personnel at Lafayette, Louisiana, about May 15 to organize the study.

The nutria is prolific, a female bearing about five litters in two years with an average, in the South, of five or six young in a litter. A female begins to bear young at about 15 months.

Some nutria were brought into the United States by fur farmers in 1899 but apparently did not become established here. In 1937 they were introduced to Iberia parish in Louisiana and maintained in an "escape-proof" fence. However, because of a storm in 1939 several escaped. Later about 50 pairs were released. Nutria are now found by the thousands all the way from Mississippi delta to the mouth of the Rio Grande. The animal is also now established on the West Coast.

It formerly was considered a valuable fur resource in South America. Because of its weight--about 20 pounds--the difficulty of preparing the skin and the low price of nutria skins in this country, trappers have been losing interest in the animal for several years.

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